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WKU football

Tops head to Florida looking to close final stretch strong

WKU prepared to face former Hilltopper Taggart and FAU

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Western Kentucky defensive back Antwon Kincade (31) pulls down Florida Atlantic quarterback Nick Tronti (6) Saturday, November 2, 2019, during Florida Atlantic's 35-24 win at Houchens-Smith Stadium. (Bac Totrong/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Bac Totrong/Daily News

Western Kentucky enters the closing stretch with a chance to still finish the regular season with a winning record.

It's a four-game Conference USA ending that starts at 5 p.m. CST Saturday against Florida Atlantic in Boca Raton, Fla.



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When WKU looks at the Owls, they notice some similarities to one of the two teams they've claimed victory against in 2020 – Middle Tennessee.

“Their quarterback’s really talented. He can run with the ball really good. Reminds me of kind of the Middle Tennessee mindset. We’ve got to be able to control him and not let him make big plays,” WKU coach Tyson Helton said. “If the defense can keep the score down and offensively if we can find the end zone and not turn the ball over, we’ll have a chance in the fourth quarter to win it.”



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FAU is 2-1 and sits behind Marshall in the league standings after dropping a 20-9 decision to the Thundering Herd on Oct. 24. The Owls have wins over Charlotte and UTSA.

FAU’s scoring offense is tied for 91st of 103 FBS teams to have played entering the week at 18 points a game. The Owls run for 166.3 yards a game and pass for 127.3. Quarterback Nick Tronti has 382 yards and three touchdowns on 40-of-71 passing with an interception, and he is the team’s third-leading rusher behind Malcolm Davidson and James Charles with 81 yards and two scores on 35 attempts.

“I call it a ride and decide type of things, where he’s going to read some things and decide if he’s going to keep it or give it, a lot of quick throws outside, some quick throws underneath and try to get you with some misdirection, try to throw the ball over the top of your head,” WKU defensive coordinator Clayton White said. “I think there’s some very similar things (to Middle Tennessee).”

White says the biggest key against Middle Tennessee was not giving up the big plays, and that it will be key again Saturday. He said FAU will wait for them to mess up, and that WKU has to be locked in and focused. Against Middle Tennessee, WKU allowed just 102

yards rushing, and only 4 outside of quarterback Asher O'Hara, who also threw for 217 yards and a touchdown on 23-of-33 attempts.



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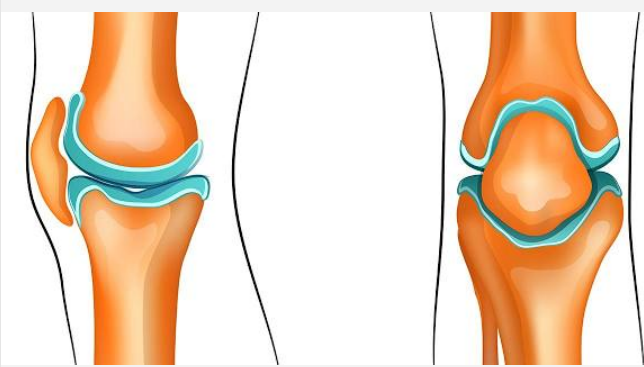
“The quarterback, he’s not Lamar Jackson, but he’s definitely mobile and he can make something, he can get out of the pocket and go get a first down or take it further if they need, but much like MTSU,” WKU senior linebacker Kyle Bailey said. “It’s going to really be able to come down to being able to dial in and not let some of the trickery and the motions end up throwing us out of the game.”

The Hilltoppers sit at 2-5 overall and 1-2 in C-USA play. WKU won 20-17 in Murfreesboro, Tenn., on Oct. 3 for its first win – the other came Oct. 24 against Chattanooga.

Stopping FAU’s offense is only part of the problem.

The Hilltoppers will need to finish drives and put points on the board after struggling with that this season. WKU ranks 95th in scoring offense nationally at 16.6 points per game, and its point total has stayed the same or gone down each game since scoring 24 in a six-point loss to Liberty in the second week of the season.


WKU has started sustaining drives somewhat better with a larger commitment to get the running backs going – FAU does have the second-best run defense in C-USA – but those drives haven’t turned into points. The Hilltoppers had a 19-play drive against Chattanooga and a 20-play drive at BYU both come up empty in the scoring column the last two weeks, for example.



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“Just get it in there,” Helton said. “Everybody’s trying hard. We feel like we’ve got good ball play, feel like the guys are executing well, so hopefully we’ll do it in the game.”

Tyrrell Pigrome will again start at quarterback for WKU. Kevaris Thomas will be available this week after battling a hip pointer in recent weeks, “but it’ll be Piggy’s show,” Helton said Thursday. Receiver Dayton Wade will be out for the third straight game with a lower leg injury.

“We’re as healthy as we’re going to be,” Helton said. “We’re not the most healthiest team, but we’ve got some guys we can go win with. That’s all we need.”

Helton said the team football aspect – defense keeping the points down, special teams making plays, and offense moving the ball, not turning it over in potentially wet conditions and finishing drives – will be the biggest key in trying to snap a three-game losing streak to defending C-USA champion FAU and trying to improve to 8-4 all time against the Owls.{{&end}}

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